



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

Breaking Open the Word

by Mary Birmingham

Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ



“Manna reigning from heaven on the Israelites (Exodus 16)”
Maciejowski Bible, 1250



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2. The Preface for Holy Thursday

Option 3.

Your Sacred Table by Saint Francis de Sales

*Divine Saviour,
we come to Your sacred table
to nourish ourselves,
not with bread but with Yourself,
true Bread of eternal life.
Help us daily to make a good and perfect meal
of this divine food.
Let us be continually refreshed
by the perfume of Your kindness and goodness.
May the Holy Spirit fill us with His Love.
Meanwhile, let us prepare a place
for this holy food by emptying our hearts.*

Amen.

**Catholic
Faith, Life
& Creed**
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Breaking Open the
Word worksheets
connect with *Catholic
Faith, Life, & Creed*
Doctrinal Sessions.

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Liturgical Context

- ▶ The Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ in some ways is a duplication of the Holy Thursday Liturgy. However, it is most appropriate that a separate feast be set aside for reflection and meditation upon so great a gift as the Eucharist since Holy Thursday does share the focus with the events of Good Friday and the Easter Vigil. Eucharist is a worthy enough tenet of faith that special focus is required to fully appreciate the enormity of the gift.
- ▶ This solemnity is called an “idea feast.” An idea feast expresses focus on a particular truth or element of Christian teaching. Such feasts arose in response to some trial within or outside the church such as heresy. The four solemnities include Trinity Sunday, Corpus Christi, Sacred Heart and Christ the King.
- ▶ This feast dates to the twelfth century in response to controversies regarding the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist.
- ▶ Thomas Aquinas’ theology of Eucharist in his Summa resonates throughout the feast and provides a focus for the feast. He elucidates theology of Eucharist in terms of past, present and future. In relation to the past the Eucharist remembers Christ’ passion, death, and resurrection. In relation to the present the Eucharist unites us as one Body in Christ—to Christ and one another. In relation to the future, Eucharist looks forward to the banquet we will one day share in heaven.
- ▶ (See Word and Worship Workbook, Year A, Mary Birmingham, Solemnity of Body and Blood Christ: “liturgical context” for a more thorough treatment of this feast.)

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today’s liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today’s Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one of the readings.

Reading: Deuteronomy 8: 2-3 14a-16b

- ▶ Today’s reading from Deuteronomy sets the stage for our focus on the Eucharist.
- ▶ The people of Israel were lost in the wilderness.
- ▶ They lost their way and they lost hope in God.
- ▶ They were exposed to a harsh desert environment complete with scorpions and poisonous snakes.
- ▶ They were hungry, thirsty and bewildered.
- ▶ God heard their cries for help and responded to their need.
- ▶ God provided water from the rock and manna from heaven.
- ▶ Paul connected both the water and the manna with the water of baptism and bread of Eucharist.
- ▶ Today we understand the manna as a foreshadowing of Eucharist—Christ/God present in the manna—God/Christ present in the bread. Presence in absence.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story from his or her life.

- ▶ What does this reading teach us about God’s relationship with the Israelites?
- ▶ What does this reading teach us about God’s relationship with us?
- ▶ What is significant about the water and the manna?
- ▶ What is the good news in this reading?

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 10-16-17

- ▶ When Paul refers to the blessing cup as participation in the Blood of Christ it is a reference to the Paschal Mystery—the saving event of Jesus’ death and resurrection.
- ▶ Paul is presenting an interpretation of the ritual and the words spoken at the Last Supper.
- ▶ This text is part of a longer section in which the community was experiencing a controversy over eating meat that was offered to pagan idols.
- ▶ Faithful Christians were not concerned about the effects of eating such meat. They believed their faith, unlike the faith of their less committed brothers and sisters was strong enough to withstand any effects of eating such meat.
- ▶ Paul maintained that in theory their assertion was correct, but also maintained that because they are subject to sin they should therefore be on guard.
- ▶ He reminded them of their history. Paul reminded them that the Exodus saga is a testimonial to the reality that their ancestors were given water from the rock and fed by the providential hand of God in the desert and still they gave in to sin and temptation.
- ▶ No one with is immune from such temptation.
- ▶ Even though he initially agreed with the Corinthians he later modified his position. He reminded his beloved community that idols represent pagan gods and demons and thus are not entities one should consider lightly.
- ▶ Participation in the blessing cup forms a bond between Christ and those who partake.
- ▶ Jewish participation in such rituals also formed a bond between God and his people.
- ▶ Paul thus insists that a person cannot eat from both the Lord’s Table and the table of demons and still remain unified in Christ.
- ▶ God desires our undivided, undistracted selves—our complete abandonment to him and his will.
- ▶ When we eat his Body and drink his Blood we eat spiritual food—Christ’s own

Body and Blood.

- ▶ Sharing in his Body and Blood is not simply participation in Christ, it is participation in the Mystical Body of Christ as well—Christ and one another.
- ▶ Participation in the cup is the fullest sign of the covenant that Christ forged by shedding his blood on the cross.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story or reflection from his or her life.

- ▶ In what way, if any, can we make a connection between the controversy over meat offered to pagan idols and our present day life of discipleship? What does it have to do with us today? What are the implications?
- ▶ Paul is telling us that God wants our undivided attention so eating meat sacrificed to idols in a sense has the potential to divide our attention. What modern day correlation can we make? What vies for our attention and has the potential to divide us?
- ▶ Participation in the cup is participation in Jesus’ death and resurrection. Jesus passed from death to life thus freeing us from slavery to sin. Consider your own life. In what way, if any, can you relate to the freedom the Israelites were given after four hundred years in captivity and the freedom Christ won for us on the cross?
- ▶ Have you ever experienced deliverance from anything? Perhaps a newfound freedom (an image of the Promised Land) a movement from something awful [slavery] to something wonderful [freedom] in your life?

Gospel: John 6:51-58

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?

- ▶ Some scholars suggest that the setting for today's gospel may have originally been the celebration of an early Eucharistic liturgy.
- ▶ Jesus' metaphor for himself is bread—the Bread of life.
- ▶ Jesus likens himself to the manna fed to the Israelites in the desert.
- ▶ Jesus insists he is nourishment for the soul.
- ▶ Jesus is an icon of God. Jesus shows us his Father's face. Without Jesus we could not see the face of God; without Jesus we would not have access to God. Jesus is an icon of the living manifestation of God.
- ▶ Some scholars hint that this pericope from John's Gospel reflects an order of worship from an early Eucharistic liturgy. Included in this Eucharistic ordo is a proclamation of Scripture, a homily, a memorial of the Paschal Mystery (Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension, sending of the Spirit) and communion/participation in the Eucharistic bread and wine.
- ▶ What is meant by the word flesh? Flesh referred to the totality of a person—personhood. The flesh is utterly powerless without the transformative power of the Holy Spirit to empower it and make a change.
- ▶ Similarly, the transformation of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ can only take place through the transformative power of the Holy Spirit.
- ▶ Through the power of the Spirit to transform (referred to as *epiclesis* from the Greek meaning to invoke) the mere elements of bread and wine are transformed into Christ life force—his Body and Blood.
- ▶ Jesus spilled blood and water from his side on Calvary. Through the transformative power of the Holy Spirit, his blood and water was transformed into the water of baptism and the Blood of the Eucharist. Thus the Church was born on Calvary. Without baptism and Eucharist the church dies.
- ▶ The sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist allow the Church to grow and continue on as well as sustain and strengthen it.
- ▶ This text from John gives us the most powerful expression of what we believe about the Eucharist. It expresses our Eucharistic theology.
- ▶ The bread that Jesus gives is living bread. It is his own flesh---body, soul and divinity--Jesus in all his totality---the total self of Jesus.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites reflection on the following questions.

- ▶ Jesus gives us the totality of himself---his humanity and his divinity. What does that mean to you?
- ▶ What are the implications for your life?
- ▶ How are you to live as a result of Jesus' self-gift to you?

- ▶ John tells us that Jesus is God's own Word--the Word made FLESH. Jesus is God's Word.
- ▶ God's Spoken WORD comes to life in the person of his Son.
- ▶ Jesus gives his flesh---his complete and total life energy---his life force.
- ▶ The life force was most understood to exist in one's blood.
- ▶ Thus, Jesus' food is the only food that gives real life.
- ▶ This Gospel gives us a beautiful theology of our sacraments of baptism and Eucharist.
- ▶ Baptism gives us the life that Jesus shared with his Father---divine life---the Eucharist is spiritual food that nourishes that life.
- ▶ Jesus promises to abide in his disciples---he abides in them and they abide in him.
- ▶ Eucharist continues that holy indwelling of Jesus in each and every one of us.
- ▶ Through the Eucharist Christ dwells within us.
- ▶ This indwelling of Jesus in our hearts through our participation in the Eucharist assumes and invites a deep intimacy with Jesus.
- ▶ Jesus is intermingled in our life---his BLOOD FLOWS THROUGH OUR VEINS!
- ▶ There are three biblical interpretations of the Lord's Supper. It is a memorial of Jesus' Paschal Mystery---a re-presented sacrifice. It is a continuation of the meals Jesus shared with his disciples here on earth and after he rose from the dead and thus a participation in and anticipation of the future messianic banquet in heaven. It is the ritualizing of Jesus' Incarnation---Christ's very own Body and Blood are made present to us through the transformed elements of bread and wine.
- ▶ John's Eucharistic theology represents the third and last category.
- ▶ Manna in the desert feeds the body. People still die even though they ate manna.
- ▶ The Bread that Jesus gives, however, offers eternal life.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix for an example. (@ Ten-twelve minutes)

- ▶ What are the primary themes in this Gospel?
- ▶ What theology of Eucharist is expressed in this gospel?
- ▶ What does it mean to you that when you receive the Eucharist Jesus' Blood will run through your veins?
- ▶ If someone were to ask you what it means to feed on Jesus, what would you tell them?
- ▶ In what way are you presently feeding on Jesus in your life right now?
- ▶ The Holy Spirit changes the elements of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. The Spirit changes the Christian community into his Body as well. Thus, the Holy Spirit empowers us to become Eucharist (Christ's Body) in the world.

Have you ever known anyone who is Eucharist in your world? What characteristics does this person possess? Drawing from your experience of this person, what does it mean to “become Eucharist”?

- ▶ What are the implications of this Gospel? What is the challenge?

- ▶ After reflection on today’s liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God’s call?

Concluding Prayer

Repeat OPENING PRAYER for this session OR

Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97.

APPENDIX

What does it mean to you that when you receive the Eucharist Jesus' Blood will run through your veins?

When we say that Jesus' blood runs through my veins when we participate in the Eucharist, it means that we are to become what we have received. When we approach the Lord's Table with the realization that Eucharist is what empowers us to go out into the world and share the Good News, take up our cross and live the Gospel, we are able to more fully and consciously cooperate with the grace of the sacrament.

A woman in our parish lost her child in a traffic accident last year. The driver of the car was cited as responsible for the accident. The mother could have lapsed into hatred and bitterness as a result of the loss of her precious child. She chose instead to forgive. She chose the way of Christ and the Cross, the way empowered by her participation in the Eucharist. She became Eucharist to the driver of the car. She reached out to her and forgave her. A tremendous burden was lifted not only from the driver of the car but from the mother of the victim as well. She became Eucharist and in turn was sustained in and through the power of the sacrament.

Life presents us with so many opportunities to become Eucharist in the world. So many people have been Eucharist in my life. One event stands out. My severely mentally ill child was on the road; we had not heard from him for a long time. We lived in constant worry for his safety as he was in no condition to care for himself.

One night we received a phone call from him. He was in a city where a friend of mine lived. I called her and told her that he was at the airport. Her entire family went to the airport, picked him up, took him to their home, fed him, cared for him, and allowed him to stay with them until he could get his bearings. That very special family bent over backwards to reach out to my child. They cared for him for several months until we were able to convince him to return home. This wonderful family reached out to us in love; they were the hands and feet of Christ. They were Eucharist to us.



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Symbols of Bread and Wine
Eucharist Series
Sacraments

Evangelization
Catholic Social Teaching
Baptism

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

SYMBOLS OF BREAD AND WINE

Today's feast that meditates upon the mystery of Christ's Body and Blood logically invites a reflection on the sacramental symbols of bread and wine. This feast focuses on the Eucharist. Thus today's session will focus on the Eucharistic symbols of bread and wine—the heart of the Eucharist.

EUCCHARIST SERIES:

Our premier celebration of the Paschal Mystery—the life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension sending of the Spirit is made manifest and re-presented for us in the Eucharistic liturgy. The solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ is an appropriate time to focus our attention on the Mass. Today we will focus on part ____ of the Eucharistic Series.

SACRAMENTS

Jesus is present to us in the sacraments. Jesus promises to send his Spirit to go forth with his community of believers as they establish the reign of God in the world. We are strengthened to go forth through our participation in the sacraments. Christ's presence and union continues through the generations in the sacraments. Eucharist is a premier sacrament of Christ's presence in our lives. Thus, today the doctrinal session will focus on the doctrinal issue of SACRAMENTS.

EVANGELIZATION

Jesus feeds his followers; he nourishes them with a sacred meal and with his word. He feeds them in order to strengthen them for the mission to build the kingdom of God. We are called to go forth and share what Jesus has given us with those still asleep to his life within. Thus, the focus of today's doctrinal session will be what the Church teaches us about EVANGELIZATION.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

Jesus invites everyone to his feast. All are welcome. He especially welcomes the poor and oppressed. Eucharist commits us to the poor and to the social teaching of the Church. Thus, today, the doctrinal focus will be Catholic Social Teaching.

BAPTISM

Today's Gospel expresses both our baptismal and Eucharistic theology. Water and blood flowed from the side of Jesus and thus the Church was born. John leads us deeply into the heart of our Eucharistic theology. It is thus most appropriate that we focus our doctrinal session on BAPTISM.